

# Christmas

## The Date of Christmas

The idea to celebrate Christmas on December 25 originated in the 4th century. The Catholic Church wanted to eclipse the festivities of a rival pagan religion that threatened Christianity's existence. The Romans celebrated the birthday of their sun god, Mithras during this time of year. Although it was not popular, or even proper, to celebrate people's birthdays in those times, church leaders decided that in order to compete with the pagan celebration they would themselves order a festival in celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Although the actual season of Jesus' birth is thought to be in the spring, the date of December 25 was chosen as the official birthday celebration as Christ's Mass so that it would compete head on with the rival pagan celebration. Christmas was slow to catch on in America. The early colonists considered it a pagan ritual. The celebration of Christmas was even banned by law in Massachusetts in colonial days.



## Mistletoe and Holly



Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Druids used mistletoe to celebrate the coming of winter. They would gather this evergreen plant that is parasitic upon other trees and used it to decorate their homes. They believed the plant had special healing powers for everything from female infertility to poison ingestion. Scandinavians also thought of mistletoe as a plant of peace and harmony. They associated mistletoe with their goddess of love, Frigga. The custom of kissing under the mistletoe probably derived from this belief. The early church banned the use of mistletoe in Christmas celebrations because of its pagan origins. Instead, church fathers suggested the use of holly as an appropriate substitute for Christmas greenery.

## Poinsettias

Poinsettias are native to Mexico. They were named after America's first ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. He brought the plants to America in 1828. The Mexicans in the eighteenth century thought the plants were symbolic of the Star of Bethlehem. Thus the Poinsettia became associated with the Christmas season. The actual flower of the poinsettia is small and yellow. But surrounding the flower are large, bright red leaves, often mistaken for petals.



## The Christmas Tree

The Christmas Tree originated in Germany in the 16th century. It was common for the Germanic people to decorate fir trees, both inside and out, with roses, apples, and colored paper. It is believed that Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, was the first to light a Christmas tree with candles. While coming home one dark winter's night near Christmas, he was struck with the beauty of the starlight shining through the branches of a small fir tree outside his home. He duplicated the starlight by using candles attached to the branches of his indoor Christmas tree. The Christmas tree was not widely used in Britain until the 19th century. It was brought to America by the Pennsylvania Germans in the 1820's.



## Xmas

This abbreviation for Christmas is of Greek origin. The word for Christ in Greek is Xristos. During the 16th century, Europeans began using the first initial of Christ's name, "X" in place of the word Christ in Christmas as a shorthand form of the word. Although the early Christians understood that X stood for Christ's name, later Christians who did not understand the Greek language mistook "Xmas" as a sign of disrespect.

## The Candy Cane



Candy canes have been around for centuries, but it wasn't until around 1900 that they were decorated with red stripes and bent into the shape of a cane. They were sometimes handed out during church services to keep the children quiet. One story (almost certainly false) that is often told about the origin of the candy cane is as follows:

In the late 1800's a candy maker in Indiana wanted to express the meaning of Christmas through a symbol made of candy. He came up with the idea of bending one of his white candy sticks into the shape of a Candy Cane. He incorporated several symbols of Christ's love and sacrifice through the Candy Cane. First, he used a plain white peppermint stick. The color white symbolizes the purity and sinless nature of Jesus. Next, he added three small stripes to symbolize the pain inflicted upon Jesus before His death on the cross. There are three of them to represent the Holy Trinity. He added a bold stripe to represent the blood Jesus shed for mankind. When looked at with the crook on top, it looks like a shepherd's staff because Jesus is the shepherd of man. If you turn it upside down, it becomes the letter J symbolizing the first letter in Jesus' name. The candy maker made these candy canes for Christmas, so everyone would remember what Christmas is all about.



## Santa Claus

The original Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was born in Turkey in the 4th century. He was very pious from an early age, devoting his life to Christianity. He became widely known for his generosity for the poor. But the Romans held him in contempt. He was imprisoned and tortured. But when Constantine became emperor of Rome, he allowed Nicholas to go free. Constantine became a Christian and convened the Council of Nicaea in 325. Nicholas was a delegate to the council. He is especially noted for his love of children and for his generosity. He is the patron saint of sailors, Sicily, Greece, and Russia. He is also, of course, the patron saint of children. The Dutch kept the legend of St. Nicholas alive. In 16th century Holland, Dutch children would place their wooden shoes by the hearth in hopes that they would be filled with a treat. The Dutch spelled St. Nicholas as Sint Nikolaas, which became corrupted to Sinterklaas, and finally, in Anglican, to Santa Claus. In 1822, Clement C. Moore composed his famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which was later published as "The Night Before Christmas." Moore is credited with creating the modern image of Santa Claus as a jolly fat man in a red suit. However, his authorship is controversial. Some scholars suggest that it was Henry Livingston Jr. who wrote the poem.



# Christmas Vocabulary

**We can use these words with or without 'Christmas' before them:**

A lot of Christmas vocabulary can be used with or without the word 'Christmas' in front of it. For example we can talk about 'Christmas crackers' or just 'crackers':

**a cracker (n):** a small paper tube which is pulled from each end by two people at Christmas time. It makes a sharp bang (or 'crack') when it is pulled and inside there is a toy and a joke written on a small piece of paper

**a carol (n):** a religious song (hymn) or non-religious song about Christmas

**wrapping paper (n):** specially decorated paper (usually with pictures of snowmen, Christmas trees, Santa Claus (etc.)) used to wrap Christmas gifts

**a card (n):** a greeting card (like a birthday card) which you send to your family and friends around Christmas time

**a tree (n):** a pine tree (an evergreen tree) with leaves like needles which people put in their house around Christmas time and decorate with fairy lights, ornaments and tinsel

**a wreath (n):** a circle of fresh or dried flowers or leaves which people hang on their front door around Christmas time

**a pudding (n):** a traditional dessert made of dried fruit soaked in alcohol, eaten on Christmas day

**an ornament (n):** a decoration (a small ball, toy or piece of chocolate) which is hung on a Christmas tree

**We can't leave out 'Christmas' with these words:**

**a white Christmas:** when snow falls on Christmas day

**Christmas lights:** outdoor lights, usually in town squares or main streets which are put up and lit during the Christmas period

**Father Christmas (also known as Santa Claus):** an imaginary person who brings presents to children on the night before Christmas Day. Traditionally he is an old man with a red suit and white beard

**We don't use 'Christmas' before these words:**

**fairy lights:** small lights which are hung on a Christmas tree

**tinsel (n):** lengths of glittered string which are hung on a Christmas tree

**Secret Santa:** people who work together put everyone's names in a hat and each person picks out one name. They have to keep the name a secret from everyone else and buy a small gift for that person

**mistletoe (n):** a small green flower which is hung from the ceiling around Christmas time. When people are under the mistletoe at the same time, they have to kiss each other

**Boxing day:** The day after Christmas day

**the festive period:** the time around Christmas and New Year when there are lots of parties and Christmas activities

**New Year vocabulary:**

Scottish people are famous for the ways they celebrate the coming of the New Year so it's no surprise that a lot of words connected with New Year are Scottish.

**Auld Lang Syne (Times gone by):** a Scottish song that people sing at New Year to remember old friends

**to first foot (v):** to be the first person to visit friends or relatives in the New Year. Traditionally if the visitor is tall, dark and handsome, he (or she!) will bring the people in the house good luck for the rest of the year

**Hogmanay (or New Year's Eve):** The evening before New Year's Day

**a New Year's resolution:** A promise we make at New Year to improve ourselves

**The Bells:** traditionally, bells ring out at midnight to signal that the New Year has arrived. In the UK, radio and TV often broadcast the chiming of the bells from Big Ben in London